

News Slant and the National Intelligence Estimate

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I. INTRODUCTION

The media is an instrument of the national conversation with extraordinary influence over the perceived salience of political issues and public perceptions thereof. The formation of public opinions through the deliberative process and the relative distribution of competing messages create a mediated reality upon which public policy resides. The news media tend to “select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation” (Entman 1993). Audience interpretations are thus often a function of information made available to audiences and by the way that information is labeled or presented (Hall & Cappella 2002).

This study will examine patterns of *news slant* over a four week period surrounding the release of the *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE) in the fall of 2006. To the extent the framing of individual news reports favors one side or the other in a current or potential dispute, the news is said to be *slanted* as such (Entman 2006a). Although due to the limited size of our examination window we are unable to account for various forms of *bias* over time (this would require a much longer analytical time-frame), our approach will further the study of media effects and communication by illustrating how slant as such can promote variable interpretation of any given news event.

Our focus will be on the framing in headlines, stories, and editorials insofar as these frames support a given interpretation of the NIE. We will attempt to show how the media’s framing of the NIE may promote positions adopted within the political domain, with potential bearing on the foreign policy agenda. While we recognize that audiences

are not passive absorbers of media messages, we will not attempt to unravel the mutual effects of exposure and ideological predisposition or to examine the joint contingencies among source, message, and audience factors upon which persuasion depends (McGuire 1986). Instead we will limit our study to a demonstration of the variable, and often contradictory, story frame sets presented to audiences when a particular story breaks; as well as bureaucratic and organizational (i.e. editorial, staff, and syndication) conflict within individual newspapers with respect to slant. The results of this study may then serve as a catalyst for future research.

II. BACKGROUND

Framing the Iraq War

The realities of the multi-dimensional and highly demanding post-9/11 international security environment are seemingly at odds with the Bush administration's myopic preoccupation with Iraq since the buildup to the invasion in March 2003. In spite of disproved assertions about the threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) posed by Saddam Hussein, and the consequences of successive policy failures in the prosecution of the war, the Bush administration continues to frame the war in Iraq along the master narrative of a permanent and necessary "war on terror." Indeed the administration's incessant juxtaposition of Saddam and 9/11 implies an alliance between Al-Qaeda and Iraq that has never reflected the judgment of the intelligence community. Limited and circumstantial data has been directed at an uninformed citizenry seemingly predisposed to accept a sinister relationship between "Arabs" as such, in large part due to a media climate inattentive to competing interests in the region.

It has been suggested that the Bush administration has used a complacent media to nurture, deliberately or otherwise, a national security “panic” in the aftermath of 9/11 that is generally associated with assorted “brown people” of the Middle East. Indeed a recent *Washington Post* poll found that 46 percent of Americans still had a negative view of Islam—a crude proxy for Arabs (Samuelson 2006). Thus, as Iyengar and Kinder (1987) suggest, to the extent media attention was paid to Saddam’s “defiance” without due regard for overriding historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors, the media prevented the public from cumulating the evidence towards any logical, ultimate consequence. This has the effect of simplifying “complex issues to the level of anecdotal evidence” while encouraging reasoning by resemblance (Iyengar & Kinder 1987); thereby blurring the distinction between Saddam and 9/11 in favor of political solutions that comport with this observed “threat.” Whether intentional or careless, the distortions and mischaracterizations driving the coverage enabled politicians to inflate the risks and fan public fears about Saddam, while the wisdom and feasibility of invading Iraq went largely unaddressed.

Thus events in the Iraq war are an example of how the media’s selection, organization, and presentation of messages--the construction of issues--can compliment, reflect, or indeed shape the public agenda. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2006) speaks to the limits of press independence in light of its general resistance to the notion of “torture” at Abu Ghraib and failure to probe into the specific policies and structures that sanctioned these tortures. What emerges is a picture of co-dependency between the government and its agents of information management, and an establishment press dependent on access to officials within an “embattled information environment.”

Despite signs that the public was receptive to challenges to the government narrative and a range of evidence to support an interpretation of “torture,” the press ignored the broader implications of torture, indeed by not labeling it as such, in order to protect the official endorsement upon its credibility. Thus it was “the administration spin, and not evidence in the many documents that contradicted it, that dominated mainstream news perspectives on Abu Ghraib” (Bennett, et al. 2006). “None Dare Call It Torture” simplifies the idea of a dominant news frame by focusing primarily on dominant definitions found in press coverage of Abu Ghraib, suggesting the affair was the subject of a linguistically constructed reality unchallenged by a counterframe built upon “culturally resonant words and images, on that attains sufficient magnitude to gain wide understanding as a sensible alternative to the White House’s interpretation” (Entman 2004).

The National Intelligence Estimate

Notwithstanding questions of media complicity in selling the war to the public, the conflict has evolved into a debacle of historical proportions with broad implications for American foreign policy. In the first formal assessment of global terrorism by US intelligence agencies since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq (September 2006), it was revealed that both the war on terror and operations in Iraq had actually *increased* the threat of terrorism against the United States. While the report, representing a consensus view of the sixteen different spy services in government, points to both global and localized disruptions in Al-Qaeda’s operations, it is suggested that the movement has metastasized and was “spreading and adapting to counterterrorism efforts” (*Trends in*

Global Terrorism 2006). While the portrait that emerges within *National Intelligence Estimate - Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States* is troubling at best, the Bush administration continues to frame its military operations as a successful deterrent to terrorism. “A frame operates to select and highlight some features of reality and obscure others in a way that tells a consistent story about problems, their causes, moral implications, and remedies” (Entman 1996).

Indeed the Bush administration has done remarkably well in deflecting the conclusion that its blunders are responsible for multiple failures in a costly adventure that is peripheral to the real threat. Despite polls indicating the public has turned against the war, and the resulting sea-change in the congressional order that betrays the president’s claims of accomplishment, the administration has been faithful to the notion that they are engaged in a global war on terror in which the United States is prevailing. In the face of mounting casualties, exorbitant costs, and disturbing revelations about secret prisons, torture, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and various rights violations; the administration has retreated behind the mantra that “democracy is on the march” in an existential struggle against a monolithic radical Islam (sometimes labeled “Islamofacism”) bent on world domination. Yet while the concept itself flows from the same abject lack of complexity that would confound Saddam with 9/11 to get the United States into Iraq, it has helped inoculate the administration against the pressure of increasingly vivid horrors by inflaming passions at the expense of information about the true nature of the challenge we face.

It would seem, however, that the publication of an official report that lays bare the existential dangers of Bush’s “stay the course” logic would create a media storm that

would ultimately result in a major shift in the political agenda. The fact that a study as explosive as the NIE was treated with relatively short exposure in the press, with little to no impact on administration policy, raises a number of important questions given the media's management of wartime information thus far. Was this story given due prominence in light of the potential ramifications for the country; and, if so, for how long? Did the attributes assigned to this story by the press generally favor the Bush administration at the expense of the movement to reevaluate our Iraq strategy? Was there imbalance with regard to the overall tone, language, and direction of the coverage over time? Did individual news organizations maintain a consistent editorial tone or was there variance in coverage as the story developed?

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In keeping with the early research on agenda-setting, the scholarly literature usually traces the relationship between media content and quantitative patterns of coverage, and corresponding surveys of the public agenda. The evidence points to a correspondence between media concentration on an issue and its relative importance to the public. The type of issues covered, their number, the process and extent of their development within the public agenda, and the varying potential for influence by different media are variously emphasized. More recent studies, including those conducted by Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner (2005), suggest a measure of interdependency between the media agenda, the public agenda, and the public policy agenda.

Walter Lippman (1922) laid the intellectual groundwork for agenda setting theory

in his seminal text, *Public Opinion*, by suggesting that public priorities and attitudes tend to reflect the media's prioritization of issues and the attendant tenor of the coverage. The term of art itself, "agenda-setting," was first coined by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in a 1972 study of undecided 1968 presidential election voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina pointing to a near perfect correlation between patterns of news coverage in network and print media, and issues of public concern. Many published studies worldwide utilizing quantitative measurements have since documented this influence of the news media under a range of research designs, including panel studies, time-series analysis, and controlled laboratory experiments (McCombs 1993).

Setting the Political Agenda

In recent years attention has turned with increasing frequency to the relationship between media and political agenda setting, particularly with respect to the priorities, foci, and deportment of political institutions at every level through the lens of the agenda-setting model (see Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994). These studies investigate the relationship between the media agenda and the political agenda by uniting the focus of communication research and political science (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004). Results of these studies accordingly range from limited or absent media effects on the political agenda to decidedly strong effects, with no dominant outcome. "If media scholars are, by and large, much taken with the agenda-setting power of the press, many scholars of traditional political institutions seem less impressed" (Bartels 1996).

Framing

The agenda setting function of the news media is not limited to directing public attention towards a particular issue or topic; it also colors public perceptions and understanding of an issue by assigning particular attributes to the object of focus. “From the pattern of the total news coverage, the public learns what journalists consider the important issues are...From the details of this coverage—the agenda of attributes presented by the news media—the public forms its images” (McCombs 1993). Viewers are sensitive to contextual cues when they reason about national affairs to the extent that their explanations of issues like terrorism are critically dependent on the particular reference points furnished by media presentations.

Although not consciously chosen as such, these frames speak to the effort of the media to convey information in a direct and relevant manner. They therefore often reflect shared cultural narratives and myths and resonate with the larger social themes to which journalists tend to be acutely sensitive (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). In this regard it has been suggested that media coverage by and large responds to, rather than causes, the condition of the political domain, “indexing” conflict visible within the formal mechanisms of government, such as congressional debate (Nelson 1990). In this vision of public discourse deliberation in the public sphere is highly contingent upon and merely reflects the discursive behavior of political elites (Zaller 1992). The positions of elite political actors “on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world” define the key parameters and points of reference in dialogue and thought for both the media and the public in a top down process (Zaller 1992). Others have argued that political actors believe that the media determines the public’s issue priorities, anticipate

the impact on public opinion, and build their political strategy accordingly (Eilders 1997). In fact, most political agenda-setting studies make the implicit claim that media coverage leads mechanically to political attention (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004).

[Thus] whether media coverage is considered as a *cause* of public opinion, media leading the public, or rather as a consequence, public leading the media, is not important either as long as political actors consider the media as an indicator of the public's needs and wishes. Effective public agenda-setting is not a prerequisite for political agenda-setting. (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004)

Slant/Bias and Media and War

Steven Livingston (1997) explains that the conduct of U.S. diplomacy and foreign affairs is increasingly subject to media coverage through a process of agenda-setting, acceleration, and/or impediment, collectively dubbed “the CNN effect.” The real-time, global news environment permitted by advances in technology demands accelerated issue response and decision-making, with attendant effects on intelligence gathering and diplomatic communication. This new media environment may likewise impede foreign policy due to compromised operational security resulting from inadvertent disclosures; and to the extent emotive images corrode public confidence in a course of action, especially war. Livingston's research implies that media effects on the Iraq war policy involve processes of acceleration and impediment, although with limited agenda-setting agency as media coverage *followed* rather than shaped official action.

Bennett and Livingston (2003) suggest that press reliance on government information management has resulted in an “uneasy and disjointed” media environment characterized by simultaneous antagonism and dependency. Whatever measure of autonomy exists at the margins of government control seems to pose a limited challenge to managed news. Entman (2003) notes that stories that do test the leading narrative as a

news frame is emerging have little viability without some degree of official encouragement. The dominant narrative is thus reinforced by networks of sources and a convergence of news stories in a process of “cascading activation” that shapes the conventional wisdom and discourages alternative framing of an issue. The standard line is overcome only when countervailing frames achieve a critical mass through repetition and amplification in the national media, sparking elite engagement and encouraging further media attention (Entman 2006b).

Indeed studies have long pointed to the homogeneity in coverage across supposedly competing news outlets given the similar norms and pressures to which they are exposed. This is especially true with respect to the study of foreign affairs and media, wherein homogeneity is assumed (Herman and Chomsky 2002), except where disagreement persists among the elite (Bennett 1990; Mermin 1999; Entman 2004). To date a consensus within the literature finds that public officials exercise immense control over the content and framing of international news in spite of technological advances in news gathering that support media independence (Bennett and Livingston 2003).

A content analysis of battle and casualty coverage of the Iraq war on the major broadcast media conducted by Sean Aday (2004) speaks to the tendency of the media to reflect establishment sentiment as such. Coverage has tended to frame the war as a national endeavor whereby support for “our troops” (Aday, Livingston, and Herbert 2005) is coupled with patriotic allusions within a sanitized presentation of events. Despite relatively loose Pentagon censorship guidelines and embedded reporters at the front lines, television has transformed a war with thousands of American and innumerable Iraqi civilian and military casualties into “something closer to a defense

contractor's training video: a lot of action, but no consequences, as if shells simply disappeared into the air and an invisible enemy magically ceased to exist" (Aday 2004).

Entman (2005) observes that in the case of six hundred civilian casualties in Fallujah, detailed images ran counter to self-censorship tendencies, particularly when "the gruesome visuals of violent death seem tendentiously oppositional to the administration" and the national self-image. Americans had virtually no opportunity to weigh U.S. military decisions and government policies that killed hundreds of wholly innocent civilians (Entman 2005). These norms, along with other institutional forces, tend to perpetuate, indeed at times manufacture, consent for war and any policies a government wishes to associate with it (Aday 2004).

This study will build upon the methodology favored by D'Alessio and Allen (2000) in their meta-analysis of media bias in presidential elections with respect to gatekeeping (partisan story selection), statement (favorability of coverage), and coverage (relative amount of coverage) biases. We are aware, as Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman first argued in their seminal text *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), that "bias" is not limited to the ideological axis of left and right upon which the findings of D'Alessio and Allen rest. To the extent that the media operate on the basis of a set of ideological premises that depend heavily on elite information sources, "the media" becomes a one dimensional outlet for elite propaganda at the expense of information that challenges elite interests. Thus information passes through ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anticommunist (or anti-Islamic as the case may be) ideology filters that infect coverage along a range of topics, as well as what information is rejected and ultimately reported. "In short, the propaganda model

describes a decentralized and nonconspiratorial market system of control and processing, although at times the government or one or more private actors may take initiatives and mobilize coordinated handling of an issue” (Herman 2003).

Nevertheless, we will try to improve upon the left-right dichotomy by accounting for subtle forms of bias that are not captured by directional analyses. Slant may be present even while no bias is detected by measuring the physical amount of coverage each side receives or the favorability of each individual story. While D’Alessio and Allen measure for coverage and structural bias, they do little to capture the effects of *prominence*, or the relative placement of a story (within a newspaper or a broadcast), which itself constitutes an important bias. Likewise, the *persistence* with which stories are reported, especially with regard to complicated issues, is potentially dispositive with respect to bias.

Bias and slant are not limited to directing public attention towards a particular issue or topic; it can also color public perceptions and understanding of an issue by assigning particular *attributes* to the object of focus. Viewers are sensitive to contextual cues when they reason about national affairs to the extent that their explanations of issues like terrorism are critically dependent on the particular reference points furnished by media presentations. This also means that bias can be manufactured, willfully or otherwise, by underreporting the subtleties associated with one side, or making factual errors with respect to a nuanced proposition.

IV. METHODS

Data Collection

For this project we performed a content analysis on headlines, articles, editorials, and Op-Eds from domestic newspapers including national papers such as *USA Today* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and major regional papers such as *The Austin American-Statesman* and *Boston Herald*. This allowed us to cover a wide range of news markets and regions including major metro areas such as New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, and Houston, in addition to smaller regional markets such as Richmond, Pittsburgh, and San Antonio. We aimed for a geographic balance in order to provide a more realistic and comprehensive representation of the U.S. newspaper market.

English-language headlines from newspapers in Australia, Canada, France, India, New Zealand, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Kingdom were also analyzed. Translated articles were excluded because they typically lose their original context during the language conversion process. A total of 36 domestic and 31 foreign newspapers were included in this study.

Documents were sourced from two separate databases: *Library Press Display* and *LexisNexis*. The first database provided complete facsimiles of print editions allowing us to more accurately gauge the size, placement, and context of the headlines. Because *Library Press Display* has a time-limited archive, materials were also sourced from *LexisNexis*, which has a database reserve spanning two years. *LexisNexis* articles were pulled from the *Major Papers* index. Each database contained papers unique to the other providing a more complete archive of newspapers. We reviewed 119 domestic news articles, 50 domestic Op-Ed / editorial pieces, and 45 foreign news articles for a total of

214 documents. To view a complete list of the newspapers used in this study please refer to the appendix.

Search terms were expanded beyond *National Intelligence Estimate* and *NIE* to include as many references to the report as possible in an effort to capture a more inclusive collection of documents. Additional terms included: *National Intelligence Report*, *National Intelligence Assessment*, and *Terror Report*. Within the results of the sub-searches, we then searched for the two original terms using *LexisNexis' FOCUS* feature to eliminate duplicates and isolate articles that only used the secondary terms when referring to the report.

Since the focus of this study was to analyze coverage of the report itself, we further eliminated articles, Op-Eds, and editorials that merely included passing references to the report while focusing on other issues such as mid-term election campaigns, general politics, war-related book reviews, and Donald Rumsfeld. While these documents briefly mentioned the report in some form, it was never the central focus of the text and was therefore eliminated from the project. Articles that referred to a concurrent Senate intelligence report were also eliminated from the analysis.

The *National Intelligence Estimate* served as the first formal appraisal of global terrorism by U.S. intelligence agencies since the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 and represented a consensus view of all 16 spy services inside the U.S. government. While the classified *NIE* was completed in April of 2006, it was not until *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* simultaneously broke the story in their Sunday editions on September 24, 2006 that leaked portions of the report became public. Two days later, President Bush ordered the declassification and release of the report's key judgments on

September 26, 2006. Therefore the search parameters for newspaper articles and editorials were set between September 1 and October 31, 2006 in order to find any stories that may have surfaced before the initial two articles and to provide at least a month's worth of coverage for analysis.

Headline Analysis

Several variables were considered in the headline content analysis including font size, section, location on the page, and slant. Font size was classified as large, normal, or small. These designations were assigned by comparing the font size of each selected headline in relation to other headlines on the same page. In other words, was there any particular emphasis in the font size of the *NIE* headlines when compared to other stories within the same page. Additional notes were made for headlines using bold or italicized text. News sections were given the same designations as the newspapers themselves: front page, world news, opinion, and editorial. The location of each headline was also noted: above the fold, middle, lower right, and lower left.

The slant of the headline was given one of three values: negative, neutral, or positive. A negative headline suggested that the Iraq war had increased the danger of terrorism. A neutral headline simply stated that a report was released. A positive headline cited any progress made against terrorism.

Headline Slant Examples

Newspaper	Headline	Slant
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	“Iraq War Fuels Islamic Radicals”	Negative
<i>New York Sun</i>	“Al Qaeda Said to be Losing Ground”	Positive
<i>Washington Post</i>	“Part of Iraq Intelligence Report is Released”	Neutral

Article Slant Analysis

Following the headline analysis, half of the U.S. newspaper stories were selected at random for in-depth article slant analysis. Several variables including: headline slant, NIE citations, Bush administration citations, and opposition citations, were collected and then plugged into a formula created to quantify whether an article was negative, neutral, or positive.

Article Slant Formula

We felt that it was necessary to establish a consistent formula in order to reduce the subjectivity of our article analysis. This provided a more reliable and repeatable method of measurement with results that could be quantified with more confidence. The positive, neutral, or negative slant of an article was determined by combining the headline slant value with the total number of NIE (positive and negative), Bush Administration, and Opposition citation values.

A negative headline or citation highlighted the increase in danger, while a positive citation or headline highlighted any progress made, support, or defense of the policy. A neutral citation or headline simply stated that a report was released. It is important to

note that negative quotes within the Bush Administration (i.e. Republicans) were classified as opposition citations. While the majority of the opposition citations came from Democrats, the opposition designation is not exclusive to them. Citation values: Positive (+1), Neutral (0), Negative (-1).

In the case of headline slant, we felt that it was intuitively reasonable to give them a greater value than all other text citations due to their obvious prominence (R.M. Entman, personal communication, November 21, 2006). Front page headlines were given the highest value of (+/-3) with the remaining headlines valued at (+/-2). The article slant formula is as follows:

$$\mathbf{AS = (HS \ +/- \ NIEc + BAc - Oc)}$$

Or

(Article Slant = Headline Slant +/- NIE Citations + Bush Administration Citations - Opposition Citations)

Where:

AS = Article Slant

HS = Headline Slant (Total Value)

NIEc = National Intelligence Estimate Citations (Total Value)

BAc = Bush Administration Citations (Total Value)

Oc = Opposition Citations (Total Value)

In short, article slant is determined when the total value of the headline is added with the total value of the NIE and Bush administration citations before subtracting the total value of opposition citations:

Article Coding Example

Newspaper	HS	-NIEc	+NIEc	+BAc	-Oc	Total Article Slant
St. Petersburg Times	-3	-5	4	2	-2	-4

Op-Ed & Editorial Analysis

By definition, Op-Ed and editorial pieces are designed to express one particular opinion or viewpoint. The slant was much simpler to determine by reading through the text itself. Therefore the variable list for this section was limited to slant, section, and number of syndicated columns. In addition to the positive or negative slant of the writing, we wanted to look for any differences in syndicated columns that appeared in multiple papers.

The slant was also compared with the news stories running within the same papers in order to determine whether or not the two corresponded closely. Ratios of positive and negative Op-Eds were also considered within each paper.

V. RESULTS

U.S. Newspaper Headline Analysis

After reviewing the headlines of all 119 U.S. newspaper articles, 55.5% of them were negative, 35.3% were neutral, and 9.2% were positive. The majority of the negative headlines mirrored those of the two papers that first broke the story, implying that the war in Iraq was increasing the threat of terrorism against American interests. One of the most cited negative quotes from the report that appeared in both headline and article text was

“the Iraq conflict has become ‘the cause celebre’ for jihadists” (*Trends in Global Terrorism* 2006).

The few headlines that were positive focused on some of the report’s successes especially the weakened leadership of Al-Qaeda. Positive headlines were found in *The New York Sun*, *The Washington Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Fort Worth Star-Telegraph*, *The Plain Dealer*, and even one in *The Washington Post*. What we found the most interesting was that as many as 35% of the headlines simply stated that a report was issued without any noticeable slant. This should challenge the popular misconception that the news industry maintains a strong liberal bias. If the news media were predominantly liberal in bias, the negative headline numbers would have been much higher than what we found. However, judging an article by headline slant alone can be misleading, as we will point out later in this study.

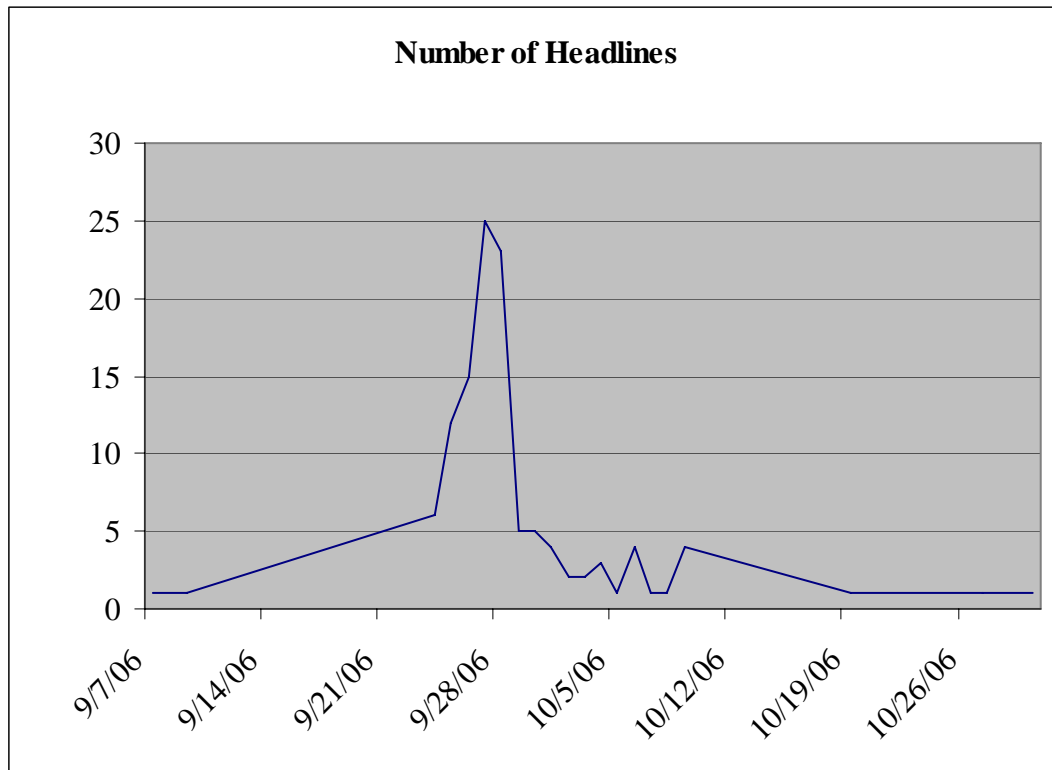
Headline Slant – U.S. Newspapers

Headlines	Total	Percentage
Negative	66	55.5%
Neutral	42	35.3 %
Positive	11	9.2%

N = 119

By the end of the first week of October the story all but disappeared from U.S. newspapers as it moved almost exclusively to the opinion sections. It did reappear briefly in late October as a scandal story when an investigation revealed that Democratic House intelligence committee staff member Larry Hanauer leaked portions of the report

to the press. Yet while the story returned, albeit in a new guise, it never regained page one coverage. In short, the span of front page headlines only lasted for a total of three days between September 24 and September 27, 2006.



N = 119

While we did not perform an analysis of television news coverage for this project, we did review the total number of *NIE* transcripts during the same timeframe. *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC*'s news coverage of the report mirrored that of the U.S. newspaper coverage. *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* also followed suit. The story faded from all four sources by the first week of October. *CNN* and *Fox News* extended the coverage by integrating the *NIE* into related stories through October 26. However, the *NIE* report itself was not

the central focus of the extended coverage. Based on our initial findings, *CNN* devoted the most cable coverage while *ABC* provided the most network coverage of the *NIE*.

Television News Coverage

Network	Total Number of Transcripts
CNN	50
Fox News	39
ABC News	22
NBC News	12
CBS News	11
NewsHour (PBS)	7

Returning our focus to the print analysis, we found that the report led to just 19 front page headlines (16.0%) which appeared within the first week of its release before moving inside the A and B sections of most papers by September 28. The bulk of the stories appeared in the secondary pages of the A section and other parts of the newspapers such as Metro, Business, or Politics.

Even the papers that first broke the story failed to maintain extensive follow-up coverage of the report's implications. The focus shifted instead to the rival political party bouts in which each side declared the other incapable of providing adequate national security. Heavy emphasis was given to Bush's allegations that the Democrats were a cut and run party.

Story Placement – U.S. Newspapers

Location	Total	Percentage
Front Page	19	16.0%
Inside A-Section	48	40.3%
B-Section	7	5.9%
Other	45	37.8%

N = 119

We also found that a large amount of the newspapers seemed more focused on local and national campaign stories that frequently had more page emphasis and space than the *NIE* stories. The concurrent Mark Foley scandal also dominated the headlines after it broke on September 24. During the same time frame, upwards of 1000 pieces were written on the mid-term elections while 399 articles and 278 Op-Eds were written about Mark Foley. While the war in Iraq was already well established in the headlines before the *NIE* release, the timing of the Foley sex scandal and its proximity to the heated mid-term elections may have signaled its death knell regardless of its higher significance. This mirrors Entman's definition of a "non-scandal" in which the mainstream news media failed to follow the smoking gun findings (R.M. Entman, classroom discussion, November 28, 2006).

Not a single positive headline made the front page, while negative and neutral headlines were evenly matched. Within the remaining sections of the U.S. newspapers the placement percentages of negative, neutral, and positive headlines were fairly equal.

Relationship of Story Placement to Slant – U.S. Newspapers

Slant	Front Page	Inside A-Section	B-Section	Other
Negative	9	27	3	27
Neutral	10	16	2	14
Positive	0	5	2	4

N = 119

The emphasis of the headline font was no different than those of other stories on the same page in 77.3% of the documents. In other words, the headline font did not stand out any larger than those of concurrent news stories on the same page. Larger font was found in 21.9% of the headlines, and just one article used a smaller font. The majority of the large font headlines appeared on the top of the front pages with a handful making it above the fold.

Headline Font Size – U.S. Newspapers

Font Size	Total	Percentage
Large	26	21.9%
Normal	92	77.3%
Small	1	0.8%

N = 119

Although large font was used in only 21.9% of the articles, there was a strong correlation between using the large font and the headline of the article being negative. Of the 26 uses of large font, 20 (76.9%) were used for negative headlines. There were no instances of large font being used for a positive headline. A meta-analysis of other studies reviewing headline font size and slant would be needed before we could assert

whether or not this represents a typical journalistic pattern for negative news stories. In the case of the *NIE* report however, it is clear that font size was a major variable in terms of negative slant.

Relationship of Large Font Headlines to Slant – U.S. Newspapers

Headline	Large Font Headlines on Front Page	Large Font Headlines in Other Locations
Negative	8	12
Neutral	5	1

N = 26

We reviewed the cumulative slant values of the newspapers with multiple entries in our article slant analysis. There were 15 newspapers with multiple entries in our study. We found that the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *Austin American-Statesman*, and *Colorado Springs Gazette* were the most negative with a value of – 12. In fact, 11 of the 15 papers studied exhibited an overall negative slant. *The Washington Times* and *Dallas Morning News* were the most positive with a value of + 6.

The Washington Post, a paper which many accuse of being liberal, actually had a positive slant value of + 2 while *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, a paper most would consider conservative, had a cumulative slant value of – 4. The sum total of all 60 articles was overwhelmingly negative at – 126.

We decided to review the cumulative values rather than the average values because we felt that this better represented the slant a regular reader or subscriber of any one paper would receive over the length of the story. Assuming a reader's loyalty favors one paper we posit as an example that an *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* reader would be

presented with a much more negatively slanted assessment of the *NIE* than a routine reader of *The Washington Times* during the course of the story's run. The subsequent framing of the report could then impact the reader's interpretations of the issue (McCombs 1993).

Cumulative U.S. Newspaper Slant

Newspaper	Cumulative Slant (-/+)
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	-12
Austin American-Statesman	-12
Colorado Springs Gazette	-12
Sacramento Bee	-11
Los Angeles Times	-9
USA Today	-7
San Francisco Chronicle	-6
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	-6
New York Times	-5
Richmond Times Dispatch	-4
Boston Globe	-3
Washington Post	+2
Boston Herald	+3
Dallas Morning News	+6
Washington Times	+6

Foreign Newspaper Headline Analysis

Overseas newspaper headlines were almost completely negative. Upon reviewing 45 English-language headlines from Australia, Canada, France, India, Ireland, Malaysia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the United Kingdom, 80% were negative. The negative headlines either focused on the report itself or the U.S. political party clashes it created while scarce positive headlines from *The Financial Times*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *Agence France Presse* consisted of direct quotes from National Intelligence Director John Negroponte.

Such an overwhelming amount of negative results would seem to coincide with the equally negative foreign opinion polls conducted with regard to the war in Iraq and other U.S. national security operations overseas in recent years. Therefore we were not as surprised by these findings.

Headline Slant – Foreign Newspapers

Headlines	Total	Percentage
Negative	36	80.0%
Neutral	5	11.1%
Positive	4	8.9%

N = 45

While most of the headlines appeared in the world sections of the papers, at least seven made the front page. However, there was no significant correlation detected between the type of headline and the placement of the story in foreign newspapers.

Relationship of Story Placement to Slant – Foreign Newspapers

Slant	Front Page	Inside A-Section	B-Section	Other
Negative	6	20	1	9
Neutral	0	3	0	2
Positive	1	1	0	2

N = 45

U.S. Newspaper Article Analysis

An in-depth content analysis of half of the U.S. news articles revealed a slightly higher margin of negative news slant than that of the initial headline analysis. 66.7% of the articles had a negative slant, followed by 31.6% with a positive slant, and just 1.7% with a neutral slant.

Article Slant – U.S. Newspapers

Article Slant	Total	Percentage
Negative	40	66.7%
Neutral	1	1.7%
Positive	19	31.6%

N = 60

The strong decrease in neutral slant and slight increases in negative and positive article slant suggests that while headlines play an important role in any given news story, there are additional factors that need to be weighed in order to determine an article's overall slant. In this study, 14 articles which registered neutral headline slants ended up

with either positive or negative article slants. One article with a positive headline slant ended up with a negative article slant.

Slant Mismatch – U.S. Newspapers

Slant	Headline Slant	Article Slant	Slant Change
Negative	32 (53.3%)	40 (66.7%)	+ 11.7 %
Neutral	16 (26.7%)	1 (1.7%)	- 15%
Positive	12 (20.0%)	19 (31.6%)	+ 8%

Type of Change	Number of Instances
Neutral Headline to Positive Story	8
Neutral Headline to Negative Story	7
Positive Headline to Negative Story	1

N = 60

It is widely known that newspaper editors, not the reporters themselves, create article headlines and determine their final placement. Marketing considerations, competing stories, and space restrictions, combined with an editor's personal viewpoints can drastically alter the final presentation and placement of a story. This may help explain, in part, some of the imbalances we found between headlines and the articles themselves. Therefore, we question whether or not headlines should serve as a sole method of measurement.

U.S. Op-Ed Analysis

The Op-Ed analysis indicated a fairly balanced split between the total number of positive (42%) and negative (44%) responses to the *NIE* findings. For the purposes of this study, we combined the opinion-editorials with the traditional editorials since the number of traditional editorials was insignificant (11 of 50) and we feel that this combination would reflect the overall published opinion within U.S. papers during the timeframe (whether the opinion was internal or external to the paper). Almost all of the newspapers published near-equal amounts of both positive and negative columns.

Op-Ed / Editorial Slant – U.S. Newspapers

Slant	Total	Percentage
Negative	22	44.0%
Neutral	7	14.0%
Positive	21	42.0%

N = 50

However, we did discover a sizeable imbalance when it came to the syndicated columns, which were dominated by such conservative writers as Charles Krauthammer, David Ignatius, and Jonah Goldberg. We did not find any syndicated columns by liberal writers. That is to say, individual columns by more liberal writers were not distributed across multiple papers.

The analysis also showed a close relationship between the editorial content and the news content within the papers. No newspaper exhibited a statistically significant

difference between the news and editorial slants. This would suggest that the editorial and news slants of the papers run closer than we had originally assumed.

Out of just 11 editorials published, *The Indianapolis Star*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Sacramento Bee*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and *Newsday* were all negative. *The Los Angeles Times* published three editorials of which one was negative, one was neutral, and one was positive. *The Washington Post* published two editorials in which Steven Simon's was negative and Robert Kagan's was neutral. *Newsday* published one negative editorial by James Klurfeld.

Much like they did in the news sections, the Foley scandal and mid-term elections also seemed to dominate the Op-Ed columns of the domestic newspapers. The Foley scandal alone registered 282 entries compared to just 50 for the *NIE*. This combined with the predominance of conservative syndicated columns may partially explain why the negative Op-Ed numbers were not higher. In conclusion, few papers seemed willing to publish their own editorial stance on the *NIE* report and instead relied on syndicated conservative columnists or other sources.

VI. ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Syndication: A 'Cause Celebre' for Editors

Syndicated columns and wire service stories experienced a variety of interesting changes throughout multiple papers. In the case of syndicated columns the headlines for the same pieces were never the same from newspaper to newspaper. While the column text remained intact, editors from individual papers would provide their own headlines as a standard procedure (J.E. Steele, personal interview, November 16, 2006).

Washington Post Writers Group columnist Charles Krauthammer published a syndicated column that criticized the *NIE* report and supported the Bush administration's push for democracy. His piece appeared in no less than nine newspapers, each time with a different headline. While the bulk of the headlines mirrored the column's viewpoint, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* were vague, if not slightly negative.

Headline Variations – U.S. Newspapers

Headline	Newspaper
"Fighting Jihadists in Iraq Keeps us Safer at Home"	<i>The Gazette - Colorado Springs</i>
"Winning War in Iraq is Best Way to Curb Terror Threat"	<i>The Columbus Dispatch</i>
"Victory is Always the Best Defense"	<i>New York Daily News</i>
"And Best Strategy is to Fight Jihadists 'Over There' in Iraq"	<i>Boston Herald</i>
"Long Before '03, Iraq Was a Jihadist 'Cause Celebre'"	<i>Austin American-Statesman</i>
"Iraq and Terrorism: a Rebuttal"	<i>Seattle Times</i>
"Iraq Already has Rallied the Jihadists"	<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>
"Intelligence Estimates: Are We Safe?"	<i>Chicago Tribune</i>
"What about Tomorrow?"	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>

We found similar occurrences with republished stories and columns by Mark Mazzetti of *The New York Times*, David Ignatius of *The Washington Post*, Jonah Goldberg of *The National Review*, and Nedra Pickler of *The Associated Press*. In fact, many of Pickler's stories had both the article and headline text changed by in-house staff reporters. This is a common practice in which wire stories from *The Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Cox News*, and other news services are edited and supplemented with new text.

News wire stories were also edited in length and content. Complete transcripts of stories from wire services such as *Cox News Service* included multiple printed cues

alerting newspaper editors where the story could end. In some cases, this completely changed the article slant.

On September 25, 2006 *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Richard Serrano published an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, which ran simultaneously in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. The full *Los Angeles Times* article included positive quotes by White House spokesman Peter Watkins, John D. Negroponte, and Republican senator John McCain. The article also included opposition quotes by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid and Democratic Representative Jane Harman of the House Intelligence Committee. In addition, negative quotes by McCain and Republican Senator Arlen Specter of the Senate Judiciary Committee were included. The negative headline referred to the *NIE* as a “bleak report on Iraq.”

In stark contrast, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* version of the same story excluded all of the opposition quotes and only published McCain’s supportive quote. The neutral headline referred to the *NIE* as an “intelligence assessment.” Both versions included the same number of negative *NIE* citations. Applying the article slant formula toward each version resulted in a negative slant for the full *Los Angeles Times* story (-3) and a positive slant for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* story (+2):

$$AS = (HS \pm NIEc + BA_c - Oc)$$

Newspaper	HS	-NIEc	+NIEc	+BA _c	-Oc	Total Article Slant
Los Angeles Times	-2	-1	0	4	-4	-3
Richmond Post Dispatch	0	-1	0	3	0	+2

VII. LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study does have a number of limitations that must be taken into consideration. While we quickly reviewed the amount of network news transcripts, television and radio coverage of the *NIE* report was not included in this analysis. Therefore, we cannot compare the overall amounts of media coverage or claim that our analysis represents a complete picture of domestic coverage.

Our newspaper samples were limited by the two databases utilized and may not constitute a true representation of the entire domestic print coverage. A larger sample of articles, including those from newspapers not found in our initial data collection, may have altered the final results. Op-Ed and editorial numbers were much lower than we had anticipated. In addition, our total number of foreign news articles was much smaller than intended due to the removal of translated documents. As a result, we cannot claim that our findings represent a true sample of the domestic published opinion or overseas print coverage.

While we feel our selected time frame was reasonably inclusive to quantify slant, our sample did not include any *NIE* stories that may have appeared after our October 31, 2006 cut-off date. There is a possibility that the report may have resurfaced following coverage of Donald Rumsfeld's public resignation on November 8, 2006 in addition to post mid-term election coverage. The story did resurface sporadically after our cut-off date, now framed as a scandal against Larry Hanauer, a Democratic staff member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, who allegedly leaked portions of the *NIE* to the press. *The Washington Post* published a story on page A3 announcing Hanauer's reinstatement as recently as November 21, 2006. However, the transition into

a scandal story should not impact our initial analysis of the news slant aimed at the *NIE* itself.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Theoretically in a post 9/11 America where the public, politicians, and news media have been actively debating the ongoing offensive against terrorism and the downward spiraling war in Iraq, the release of an overwhelmingly negative *National Intelligence Estimate* should have had far reaching consequences for the White House. All 16 of the nation's intelligence agencies provided irrefutable proof that Bush's war in Iraq was actually increasing the terrorist threat against the United States. His justifications for war were negated and the ramifications of the *NIE* should have become as big of a scandal as Abu Ghraib. Such a smoking gun in the shadow of an already heated agenda item should have received equally prominent media coverage and criticism. After all, the strategically leaked portions of the report appeared to have surfaced in the midst of a timely debate window, yet its immediate departure from the agenda fits the profile of Entman's "non-scandal" (Entman, 2006). In fact, The *NIE* story only became a scandal when the focus shifted towards the source of the leak itself, further distancing the Bush Administration from the issue at hand.

Our findings demonstrated how quickly a potentially damaging story could disappear despite its initial front-page prominence in such heavyweight newspapers as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. However, it is difficult to determine whether the media simply failed to follow the trail of this story as Entman

would argue, or if they were simply distracted by simultaneous events such as the Mark Foley scandal and impending mid-term elections.

During a lecture at The George Washington University, *Washington Post* national security correspondent, Dana Priest, suggested two reasons for the story's limited shelf life. First she stated that the *NIE* story itself did not provide anything the public did not already know. In other words, people knew that the war was going poorly making the report old news in their eyes. She also stated that it was "not the role of the media to keep an issue alive" (D. Priest, public lecture, December 5, 2006).

We disagree with her assessments. While the media may have already been reporting on the war's downward spiral, the *NIE* was an official non-partisan government report that completely contradicted the Bush administration's justifications for war and provided the final confirmation that the Iraq war actually was increasing national security threat levels. This is anything but old news. Such an official document carries much more weight than the critiques of retired military generals or news media talking heads and should have morphed into a much larger story. Fortunately the equally negative *Iraq Study Group Report* issued in early December 2006 already seems to have generated more attention. Its longevity remains to be seen however.

The results, at least in the context of this project, demonstrated how font size, frame, and placement of headlines work in conjunction with slant. Nearly all of the large font headlines were negative and nearly all of them appeared on the front page. The few newspapers that were willing to publish their own negative editorials tended to also publish negative headlines with large font regarding the *NIE*. This is anything but coincidental. However, the majority of the published opinions on the story were

controlled by conservative syndicated columnists painting a much more favorable picture of the Bush Administration.

We also demonstrated that while headlines provide their own slant, they do not always represent the final outcome of the story. We found numerous instances where positive and neutral headlines belied the predominantly negative text within the article. Therefore we caution against headline use as a sole method of measurement and encourage further study into the relationship between headlines and article text in general.

This study also illustrated the inconsistencies of syndicated columns as well as the impact of edited wire service stories across multiple newspapers. If the media is indeed biased as so many readily claim, perhaps they are more biased against the writing of their own colleagues than the actual subject matter they are covering. In any case, the author's original text (including slant) is filtered, edited, supplemented, and repositioned, through individual newspaper editors and frequently differs from the same story published in another paper. This presents researchers with accuracy problems if they code equally or exclude what would appear to be similar syndicated pieces, which have in fact been altered.

The *NIE* study represents a clear argument against liberal news media bias claims. Had a liberal bias existed, the *NIE* would have lead to a greater percentage of negative news stories and spanned a much longer time frame than it did. Conservative columnists such as Charles Krauthammer, David Ignatius, and Jonah Goldberg would not have dominated the opinion sections of the nation's major papers as they did in this study. The emphasis of the story would have remained on George W. Bush instead of shifting

toward the scandal of the leak itself. The *NIE* is the perfect example of a scandal suffering from a failure to launch.

APPENDIX

U.S. Newspaper Sample List

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette
 Atlanta-Journal Constitution
 Austin American-Statesman
 Baltimore Sun
 Boston Globe
 Boston Herald
 Buffalo News
 Chicago Sun-Times
 Chicago Tribune
 Christian Science Monitor
 Columbus Dispatch
 Dallas Morning News
 Fort Worth-Star Telegram
 Houston Chronicle
 Indianapolis Star
 Los Angeles Times
 New York Daily News
 New York Post

New York Times
 News & Observer
 Newsday
 The Oregonian
 Plain Dealer
 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
 Richmond Times-Dispatch
 Sacramento Bee
 San Antonio Express-News
 San Francisco Chronicle
 Seattle Post-Intelligencer
 Seattle Times
 Star Tribune
 Tampa Tribune
 USA Today
 Wall Street Journal
 Washington Post
 Washington Times

Foreign Newspaper Sample List

Agence France Presse
 The Australian
 Bangkok Post
 Calgary Herald
 Canberra Times (Australia)
 Central News Agency (Taiwan)
 Cornwall Standard Freeholder (Canada)
 The Daily Mirror (UK)
 The Daily Telegraph (UK)
 The Financial Times
 Gulf News
 The Herald Sun (Australia)
 The Hobart Mercury (Australia)
 The Independent (UK)
 International Herald Tribune

The Irish Times
 The Journal (UK)
 Montreal Gazette
 The Morning Star (UK)
 New Straits Times (Malaysia)
 The New Zealand Herald
 The Ottawa Citizen
 Sydney Morning Herald
 The Times (UK)
 The Times of India (New Delhi)
 Times Colonist (Canada)
 Turkish Daily News
 The Vancouver Sun
 Weekend Australian
 The Windsor Star (Canada)
 Yorkshire Post (UK)

APPENDIX

U.S. & Foreign Headline Coding Template

Date	Paper	Slant	Placement	Section	Size	Notes
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U.S. Article Slant Coding Template

Date	Paper	Section	+/-HS	-NIEc	+NIEc	BAc	Oc	+/-FS	Notes
<p>Where HS = Headline Slant (Positive or Negative) -NIEc = Negative National Intelligence Estimate Citations +NIEc = Positive National Intelligence Estimate Citations BAc = Bush Administration Citations Oc = Opposition Citations FS = Final Article Slant (Positive or Negative)</p>									

U.S. Op-Ed Slant Coding Template

Date	Paper	Slant (-/0/+)	Placement	Section	Notes
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